

ENOUGH BY DESIGN · CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Chapter Ten of Enough by Design

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The Hard Conversations
Chapter Ten of Enough by Design

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Chapter Ten of Enough by Design. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/enough-by-design (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989348).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

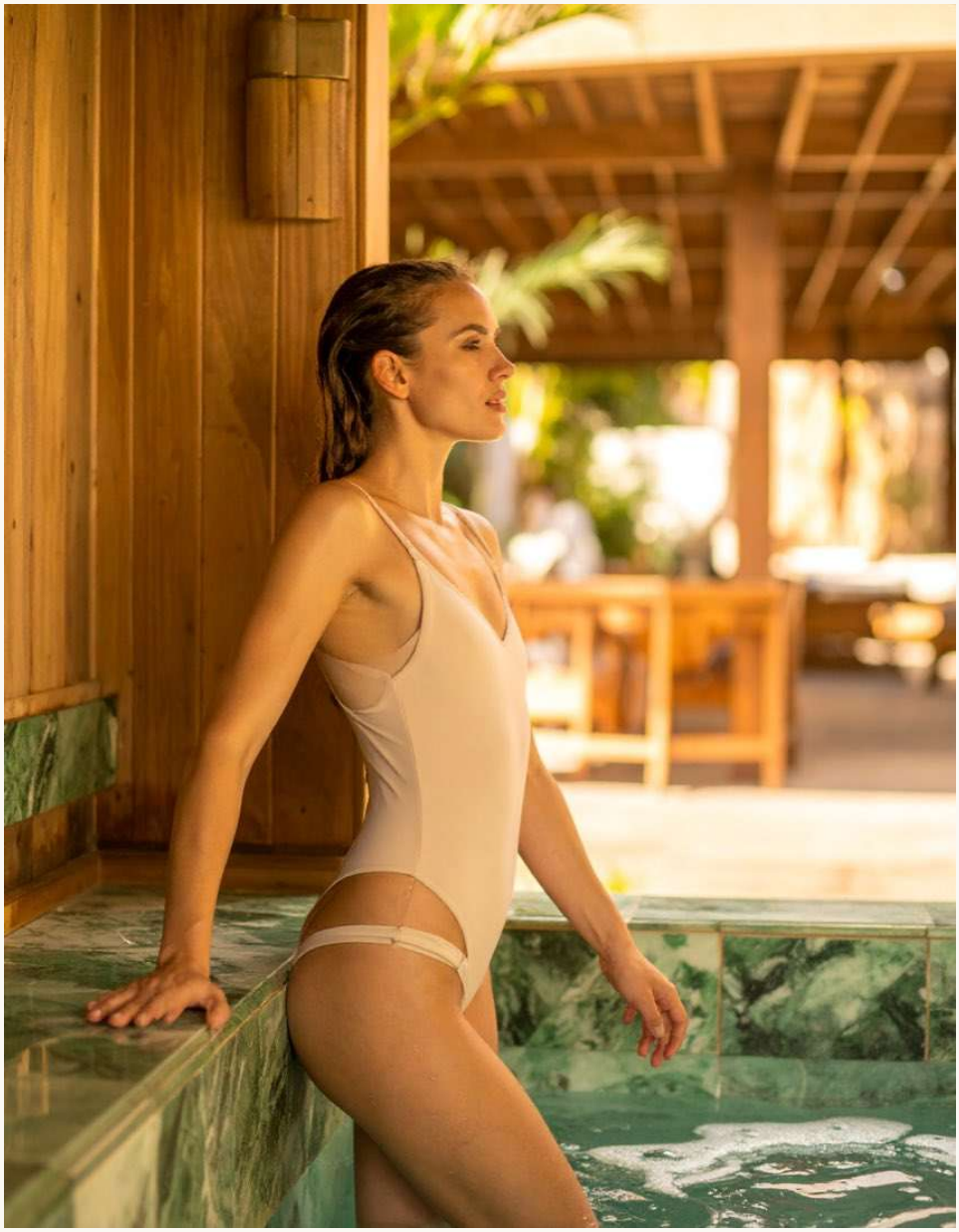
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ABSTRACT

Somewhere in every organisation that tries the work of this book, a sentence is said that undoes it. It is usually said by someone with good intentions, in a meeting that is running late, and it sounds like this: "So the point is that we can do more with what we have." That sentence is the argument of this book turned inside out. Chapters 1 to 7 have claimed that much of the scarcity a well-resourced firm or household lives inside is designed, and that what is designed can be redrawn. They have never claimed that people can be asked for more on the same resources because their attitude has improved. The difference between those two claims is the whole ethical weight of the subject, and it is decided, more often than anywhere else, in conversation.

CHAPTER TEN

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The sentence that goes wrong

Somewhere in every organisation that tries the work of this book, a sentence is said that undoes it. It is usually said by someone with good intentions, in a meeting that is running late, and it sounds like this: "So the point is that we can do more with what we have."

That sentence is the argument of this book turned inside out. Chapters 1 to 7 have claimed that much of the scarcity a well-resourced firm or household lives inside is designed, and that what is designed can be redrawn. They have never claimed that people can be asked for more on the same resources because their attitude has improved. The difference between those two claims is the whole ethical weight of the subject, and it is decided, more often than anywhere else, in conversation.

This chapter is about those conversations. Five of them recur: with a board, with a finance committee, with staff and the people who represent them, with partners and co-founders, and with a family. A sixth runs through all five, the conversation with the sceptic, who is sometimes another person and sometimes the reader. For each the chapter names what the other party fears, what they need to hear, what they should never be told, and a short script. The scripts are starting points, written to be changed. A script read word for word sounds like a script, and these conversations depend on sounding like the person who is having them.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* is in large part a book about how economic life feels in the body, and its practical chapter carries an instruction for leaders that belongs at the head of every conversation below. In weekly team meetings, he writes, the leader speaks first, "not with a polished status update, but with an honest account of what they're struggling with, what they don't know, what they need help with." Then the claim, stated as a finding of practice rather than of research:

> *This takes roughly ninety seconds and changes the entire relational field of the meeting.*[88]

Ninety seconds of honesty about what the leader does not know is the opening move in each of the conversations that follow. It is cheaper than any slide, and it does a slide's work: it tells the room what kind of conversation this is going to be.



The line that holds every conversation

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The line that holds every conversation

Before the five, the line. Chapter 3 set out the bypass test as the fifth question of the Abundance Claim Grader: does acting on a claim require anyone to accept less material support because their attitude is expected to change? If yes, the claim is rewritten until the answer is no.

In conversation the test becomes a promise that the leader makes out loud, early, and keeps. It can be said in one sentence: "Nothing we change because of this work will ask anyone to do more with less; if we find a block we designed, we remove the block, and the people stay resourced as they are or better." A leader who cannot make that promise honestly is not ready to start the work. A leader who makes it and breaks it will not be believed the second time, and should not be.

Santa Anna's book is unambiguous about the boundary this protects. It says plainly that the somatic practices it teaches "will not pay your bills, fix systemic inequality, or resolve structural injustice."[89] And it says,

in the passage that marks the floor of the whole argument, that "People living in genuine material deprivation need material resources, not consciousness shifts."[90] A conversation that forgets those sentences has stopped being about abundance and become about extraction, with better vocabulary.

With the board

What a board fears. That the work is soft: a culture programme with a philosophical name, which will take management time, produce a survey, and change nothing a director can see in the accounts. Behind that, a quieter fear, that the language of abundance is a way of telling the board that its fiduciary concerns about cost are somehow unenlightened.

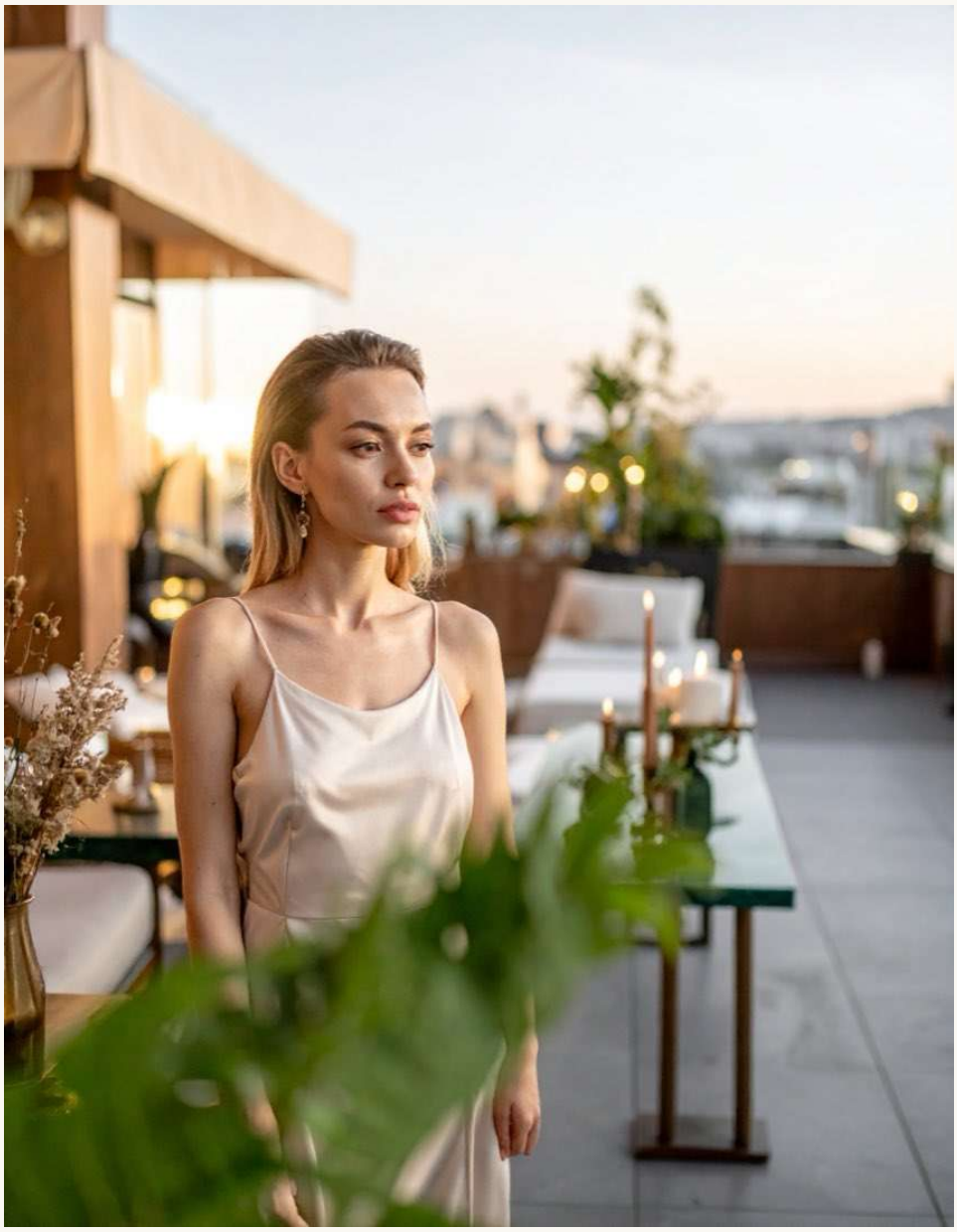
What a board needs to hear. That the work begins with the firm's own figures, not with a philosophy; that it makes a prediction before it acts and checks the prediction after; and that its first scope is small. The intangible inventory from chapter 5 is the most useful object to bring, because it speaks a board's language. Corrado, Hulten and Sichel's research, cited in that chapter, estimated that American business investment in intangibles was about one trillion dollars in 1999, roughly the same as its investment in tangible capital that year.[91] A director who has never seen the firm's own intangible spending counted is usually interested to learn its size, and the conversation moves from "is this soft?" to "is this protected?"

What a board should never be told. That the work will raise profit, cut cost by a named amount or improve engagement by a named score. None of the research in this book supports such a promise about any single firm, and chapter 9's measurement discipline exists precisely so that the firm learns what happened rather than announcing what will.

A script.

> *"I want to bring you a twelve-week piece of work, small in scope, with a written prediction at the start and a check at the end. It starts from our own accounts. Last year we spent, by our count, [figure] on things our balance sheet does not show: the time our people spend building methods, training each other, keeping our knowledge current. I think some of that investment is stuck, because of rules and habits we set ourselves. The work is to find one place where that is true, change one thing, and see. I will not promise you a number. I will bring you what we predicted and what happened, including if we were wrong."*

The firm in that script is asking for permission to learn, not for a budget. That is a much easier thing for a board to give, and a much harder thing to misuse.



With the finance committee

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With the finance committee

What finance fears. Two things, usually unspoken. First, that the work is a way of reclassifying costs to flatter results: calling training "investment" so that it looks like an asset. Second, that someone outside finance is about to start making claims about the firm's money without finance's discipline.

What finance needs to hear. That nothing in the work changes how the accounts are kept. The intangible inventory is a management view, held beside the statutory accounts, not inside them. Chapter 5's studio was explicit on this point: its accounting standards were what they were, and there are good reasons for

caution in capitalising spending whose value is uncertain. The inventory does not dispute that caution. It adds a second page that shows what the first page, by design, cannot.

And finance needs to be in the room. Chapter 8 names the finance lead as one of four roles in the twelve weeks, and the reason is not courtesy. Finance is the function that most often holds the firm's designed scarcities in its hands: the budgeting cycle that rewards spending an allocation by year-end, the approval thresholds, the procurement rules. A finance lead who helped find a designed block is the person most able to redraw it.

What finance should never be told. That "money is energy", or any similar phrase. It may be true in the register in which Santa Anna writes it. In a finance committee it will end the conversation.

A script.

> *"I'd like your help with a count, not a reclassification. Nothing in the accounts changes. I want to sit with last year's figures and timesheets for two afternoons and find out how much we spend on building what we know: methods, training, the time our seniors spend teaching. Then I want to look, with you, at whether any of our own rules are making that spending worth less than it should be. You know where those rules live better than anyone."*

With staff, and with those who represent them

This is the conversation in which the sentence at the head of the chapter does the most damage, and the one a leader should prepare for most carefully.

What staff fear. That "abundance" is the new name for doing more with less. Many people have lived through a change programme that was announced with warm language and ended in a restructuring. They have learned, reasonably, to listen for the cost under the vocabulary. Where there is a union or a staff council, its representatives carry that memory for everyone, and their job is to say it aloud.

What staff need to hear. Three things, in this order. That the work is about removing blocks the organisation designed, not about asking more of people. That the leader will make the bypass promise in writing and invite the representatives to hold them to it. And that staff will be part of finding the blocks, because they know where they are. Chapter 4's capability map is built to be filled in by the people who do the work, and the column it fills first, where the work is most alive, is a question staff are rarely asked.

There is a reason in the evidence for taking this seriously, and it comes from the house's companion series on gift and reciprocity. Knowledge is shared in an organisation, or not, according to whether people trust that sharing will be returned. Chapter 5's studio could rebuild the search on its planting library; it could not have made its designers write down what they knew if they had feared that writing it down made them

replaceable. Santa Anna's piece on Elinor Ostrom puts the general point in a sentence a staff representative might well agree with:

> *You cannot price trust on a balance sheet, but you can starve it with extractive policy.*[92]

What staff should never be told. That a change will "free up capacity", without saying what the freed capacity is for and who decides. In most workplaces "freed capacity" means headcount, and everyone in the room knows it. If time is freed by removing a designed block, say what it will go to, and let the people who gained it have a say in that.

A script, for a team.

> *"Before anything else: nothing we change in this work will mean more work for the same pay, or fewer people for the same work. I've written that down and I'd like [representative] to hold a copy. What I'm looking for is the opposite: the places where our own rules make your work harder than it needs to be. You know where those are. For the next three weeks I'd like us to map them together, starting with the question nobody asks: where is the work going well, and what is carrying it there?"*

A script, for a representative, in private first.

> *"I want you to see this before the team does, and I want you to tell me what you would need to see in writing for it to be trusted. My draft says no one will be asked to do more with less because of this work, and that any time we free up is decided about with the people who freed it. What's missing?"*

Asking the representative what is missing is not a tactic. It is the leader admitting, in ninety seconds or less, what they do not know.



With partners and co-founders

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With partners and co-founders

In a small firm the hardest conversation is often not with staff but between the two or three people who own it. Chapter 5's studio had two founding partners, and a composite though it is, the pattern is common: one partner holds the firm's knowledge, the other holds its relationships, and each quietly believes the firm depends more on what they hold.

What partners fear. Loss of standing. The intangible inventory makes visible what each partner contributes, and also what each partner has kept to themselves. A partner who discovers that a third of the firm's standards live only in their own habits may feel exposed rather than valued. A partner who discovers that their relationships are the firm's single point of failure may feel accused.

What partners need to hear. That the exercise is about the firm's fragility, not about anyone's worth; that knowledge held by one person is a risk to that person as much as to the firm, because it ties them to the

work; and that sharing it is authorship, not surrender. Chapter 5's studio presented the project leader's half-day of writing as exactly that, and the framing is not a trick. A person who writes down a firm's standards becomes their author on the record.

What partners should never be told. That one of them is the problem. Even when it is true that the firm's knowledge is concentrated in one person, the concentration was designed by the firm, usually by both partners' choices over years, and it is redrawn by both.

A script.

> *"I want to do the inventory with you, and I want us to do it on both of us. My guess is that each of us is holding something the firm can't do without, and that neither of us meant it to end up that way. I'd rather find out together than find out the week one of us is ill."*

With a family

Chapter 11 works through a household in detail, and its hardest evening was a conversation between two adults whose money histories disagreed. The scripts there are the household's own. Three further notes belong here, because the family conversation has the most at stake and the least practice.

The adults' conversation. Santa Anna's book offers a practice that is, in effect, a rule for family money talks: when money is discussed with a partner or family member, notice "what happens to both of your bodies?"[93] The useful household rule is to pause whenever either adult notices their own pattern and says so. It turns a disagreement about figures into an observation about archives, which is a conversation people can have without blaming each other.

The children. A household that only discusses money in a crisis teaches its children that money is a crisis. The conversation with a child is short and should be planned: what the household's enough line is, in terms the child can hold, and whether the household is above or below it on average. A child does not need the figures. A child needs to know which of the household's moods are about money and which are not.

The ageing parent. Care for a parent is where abundance language is most easily misused inside a family. "We can manage it ourselves" is sometimes true and sometimes a way of asking one person, often a daughter, to absorb a cost nobody has counted. The bypass test applies at home exactly as it does at work.

A script, between adults.

> *"Can we try something before we look at the numbers? Each of us says, in one sentence, what money felt like in the house we grew up in. Then we look at the statement. And if either of us notices we've gone tight or gone fast, we say so and stop for a minute. I think we've been having two different conversations."*



With the sceptic

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With the sceptic

The sceptic is in every room, and is often the most useful person in it. Chapter 8 recommends appointing one on purpose. This section is for that person, and for the reader who has been one throughout.

What the sceptic fears. That this is a fashion. That the evidence is thinner than the confidence. That the work will produce warm language and no measurable change, and that anyone who says so will be treated as having the wrong attitude.

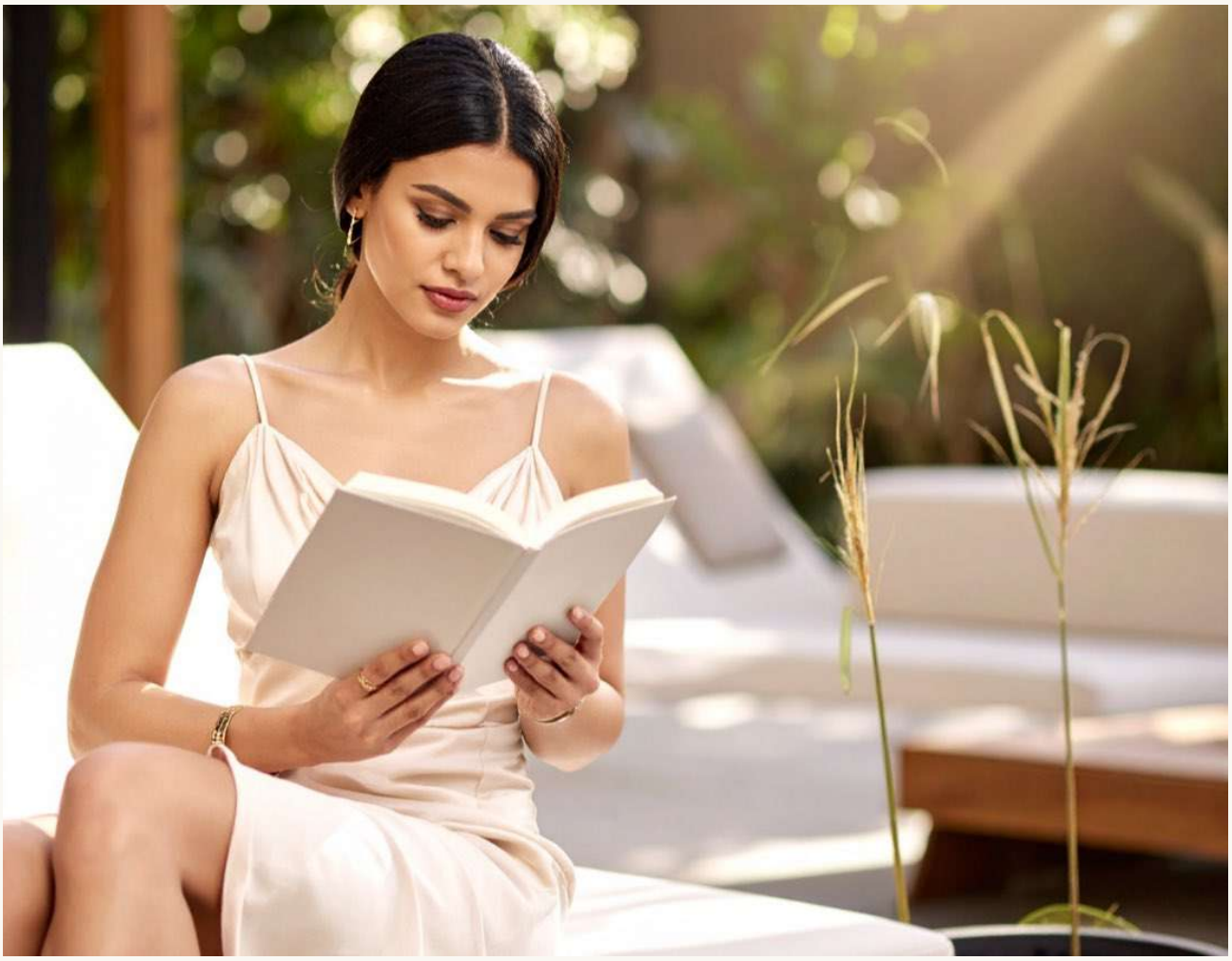
What the sceptic needs to hear. That they are right about the evidence, and that the book says so. Chapter 3 graded the research honestly: the cognitive cost of scarcity is contested; the income-and-well-being research does not support a natural ceiling on "enough"; ideas are getting harder to find. Chapter 9 sets out what will be counted, in advance. Chapter 12 states plainly what the book cannot show. The sceptic's role is not to be persuaded. It is to make sure that the prediction is written before the change and checked after it, and that the check is honest.

There is a fair point the sceptic can be offered in return. The claim of this book is narrower than its critics usually assume. It does not say that scarcity is an illusion or that attitudes produce money. It says that some constraints are designed, that designed constraints can be redrawn, and that a team which sorts its constraints honestly will make different decisions than one that does not. That claim can be tested on the sceptic's own team, in twelve weeks, with the sceptic holding the pen.

What the sceptic should never be told. That doubt is a "scarcity mindset". It may occasionally be. It is far more often a reasonable response to a pattern of overclaiming the sceptic has seen before, and treating it as a pathology confirms everything they feared.

A script.

> *"I'd like you to be the person whose job is to tell us when we're fooling ourselves. Concretely: before we change anything, you'll check that we've written down what we expect to happen, how we'll measure it, and by when. At week twelve you'll read out what actually happened. If we were wrong, you say so first."*



What these conversations share

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What these conversations share

Read across the five, the conversations have the same structure. The leader opens by saying what they do not know. They make the bypass promise. They bring a count, not a claim: an inventory, a map, a ledger. They ask the other party what is missing. They make no promise of outcome. And they name the sceptic's role out loud, so that disagreement has a seat rather than a corridor.

Santa Anna's piece on Ostrom describes markets in a phrase that fits these conversations equally well:

> *Markets are valves, not veins. They regulate flow where trust has already built the channels.*[94]

The same is true of the tools in this book. A ledger, a map or an inventory regulates nothing on its own. It works where the conversation around it has already built the channel, and the conversation is where the channel is built.

The Tool: The Conversation Card

One card per conversation. Fill it in before the meeting, alone, in about twenty minutes. Keep it after.

1 · Who, and their role in the work. Board · finance · staff or representative · partner · family · sceptic · other:

2 · What they most likely fear, in their words, not yours. One sentence.

3 · What I do not know, that I will say in the first ninety seconds. One or two sentences.

4 · The bypass promise, as I will say it to this person.

Can I keep it? yes / no. If no, do not hold the conversation yet.

5 · The count I will bring. Ledger · Capability Map · Intangible Inventory · Prediction Register · other: . One figure from it that this person will recognise:

6 · What I will not say. At least one phrase I will avoid with this person (for example: "do more with less", "free up capacity", "money is energy", "scarcity mindset"):

7 · The question I will ask them. "What would you need to see for this to be trusted?" or my own version:

8 · After the conversation (five minutes). What did they say they fear? Was it what I wrote in step 2? What did they ask for? What did I commit to, and by when?

9 · File the card with the Prediction Register (chapter 9). At week twelve, read it again: did I keep what I promised in step 4?

A note on method

The scripts in this chapter are the writer's suggestions, not the findings of any study. The firms and families referred to are the composites of chapters 5 and 11, labelled as such there.

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4. Corrado, C., Hulten, C., & Sichel, D. (2009). Intangible capital and U.S. economic growth. *Review of Income and Wealth*, 55(3), 661–685. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4991.2009.00343.x. The one-trillion-dollar figure for 1999 is the authors' estimate from their earlier work, restated in this paper; it is a national estimate resting on assumptions about which spending creates lasting value, and says nothing about any single firm.
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